

## Sūrah Kāfirūn

### Central Theme, Relationship with Preceding Sūrah and Sequence in the Subject Matter

The Prophet (sws) has declared acquittal from the die-hard leaders of the disbelievers of the Quraysh in this *sūrah*. In all the previous *sūrahs*, leaders of the Quraysh are addressed; however, the address is in their capacity of human beings and as the nation of the Prophet (sws). Nowhere are they addressed in the tone: قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ (Say: O Disbelievers!) However, in this *sūrah*, they are openly addressed as disbelievers and a declaration of acquittal and severing of ties is made. This declaration is in accordance with the law of the Almighty regarding His Messengers, as is explained in the previous *sūrahs*: Messengers first call their people towards the primary aspects of religion which are belief in monotheism and in the Hereafter. In this preaching, they address their people by saying “O my People!” and keep addressing them in these words as long as the pundits and leaders among their people do not make them lose hope. When all hope is lost from them and it becomes evident that they will not let go of their stubbornness, the Almighty directs His Messenger to migrate from them who then pronounces his acquittal and renunciation from them and migrates with his followers. The migration of a Messenger is like a very final warning for his people. If, after this event also, they do not mend their ways, the Almighty after giving them limited respite destroys all the blatant rejecters. This destruction may take place in the life of a Messenger or it may take place after him; it may also happen through some natural calamity or through the swords of the followers of the Messengers. This is a common feature in the preaching mission of all Messengers from Noah (sws) to Abraham (sws) and then right up to Muḥammad (sws) and is evident from the history of all these Messengers recorded in the Qur’ān. We have been alluding to its various aspects.

The address of يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ (O you Disbelievers!) is obviously directed at the die-hard leaders of the Quraysh who were at the forefront in opposing the Prophet (sws). Their continuous opposition and animosity had made it clear that this opposition was not based on any doubt or confusion but was in fact because of their conceit in their ancestral leadership that had made them so blind that except for God’s

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punishment nothing could have shook them. It is because of this mentality of the addressees that whatever is said in the *sūrah* is said in a very blatant manner and everything said is based on reality. People who think that the address by the words يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ (O you Disbelievers!) is meant to censure them or to express anger at them are mistaken. In reality, the disbelief (*kufr*) of a group never becomes evident unless the people on the right path communicate the truth to them to such an extent that they are left with no excuse to deny it. It is only after this that their disbelief becomes obvious and it is only after this is it allowed that those on the right path should declare their acquittal from them and if, a need arises, even to declare holy war (*jihād*) on them. The Messengers of God have undertaken migration and launched offensives only after the truth has been communicated to their addressees to such an extent and it is this what justice entails.

This *sūrah* also ended all possibilities of any sort of compromise regarding religion with the leaders of the Quraysh. Hence this *sūrah* is not merely the *sūrah* of migration, it is practically a declaration of war with them. It is evident from our explanation of the following verse of Sūrah Yūnus<sup>1</sup> that the leaders of the Quraysh had suggested to the Prophet (sws) that if he wanted them to embrace faith, then the only possible option was to either bring another Qur'ān or to make some changes in it which were acceptable to them (١٥:١٠) اْتِ بِقُرْآنٍ غَيْرِ هَذَا أَوْ بَدِّلْهُ (Bring some other Qur'ān, or change it, (10:15))

We have written there that it is evident from various insinuations of the Qur'ān that the greatest objection which the leaders of the Quraysh had was on the Qur'ānic teaching of monotheism and they stressed that a change be made in it. They regarded it to be against their ancestral beliefs and feared that if they rejected all gods except God as required by the Qur'ān then this would ruin their political position. The answer to this demand of theirs was given from the Prophet (sws) in the words (١٥:١٠) قُلْ مَا يَكُونُ لِي أَنْ أَبَدِّلَهُ مِنْ تَلَقَّاءِ نَفْسِي (Tell them: “What right have I to change it of my own,” (10:15)). This answer was despairing for the Quraysh, yet it was not decisive. However, in this *sūrah*, they have been answered in such a decisive and ultimate manner that the matter stood closed. In other words, this meant that no possibility of any compromise remained and if the Quraysh persisted with their stubbornness, they would have to face the swords of the believers.

The fact that this *sūrah* is placed right after Sūrah Kawthar also has great meaningfulness. It is evident from the explanation of Sūrah Kawthar that

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1. Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, vol. 3, 282.

the *sūrah* is actually a harbinger to the conquest of Makkah, which in other words means that before the *sūrah* which directs the Prophet (sws) to migrate and launch *jihād*, another *sūrah* had already given him the glad tidings of triumph and divine help. This was to assure him and his Companions (rta) that though they would have to go through the hardships of migration and war, they would be victorious in the end. The Almighty has already decided that He will bless His Prophet with success and victory and he and his Companions (rta) would be granted both the Kawthar of this world<sup>2</sup> and of the next<sup>3</sup>. Such glad tidings have also been given to the Prophet (sws) in the supplication of migration mentioned in Sūrah Banī Isrā'īl in the following words: وَقُلْ رَبِّ أَدْخِلْنِي مُدْخَلَ صِدْقٍ وَأُخْرِجْنِي مُخْرَجَ صِدْقٍ (٨٠:١٧) (Pray: "Lord, grant me an honourable entrance and an honourable exit." (17:80)). A little deliberation on the contents of this supplication shows that the Almighty has given the Prophet (sws) glad tidings in an invocatory style: although his time of leaving Makkah is drawing near yet even before this departure the Almighty has arranged for him a grand entry to the place of migration.

In short, in this *sūrah*, the message is given from the tongue of the Prophet (sws) to the leaders of the Quraysh that there is no common ground between him and them regarding the basic issue of religion: the God who is to be worshipped. This common ground neither exists at that time nor did it exist in the past and nor is there any possibility of it in the future; hence, there no longer is a chance of any compromise between him and them; they should follow their religion and the Prophet (sws) and his followers should follow theirs until the judgement of God arrives.

### Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ (١) لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ (٢) وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ (٣) وَلَا أَنَا  
عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ (٤) وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ (٥) لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ (٦)

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful

Say: "O Disbelievers! I shall not worship that which you worship. Nor will you ever worship that which I worship. Nor did I worship that which you worshipped. Nor did you ever worship that which I have been worshipping. (1-5)

To you your religion and to me mine." (6)

2. ie., the Baytullāh.

3. Ie. the Fountain of Kawthar.

**Explanation**

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ<sup>4(1)</sup>

The imperative verb قُلْ here means “to declare”. It is used in this meaning in the Qur’ān. The subject matter of this *sūrah* required a declaration so that people who were obsessed with the desire of striking a compromise between Islam and disbelief should lose hope in this strategy which was destined to fail. Such a declaration was also required so that the simpletons who regarded people who put forward such suggestions to be peace-lovers and reconciliation activists know the real truth; they should know that this was not the path of peace; it was the path of ever-increasing disorder.

The words يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ are directed at the leaders of the Quraysh who had denied the truth and who were the foremost addressees of the Prophet (sws). After years of preaching efforts from the Prophet (sws) the change that did come in them was that they demanded an amalgam of Islam and disbelief. It should be kept in mind that a Messenger is a means of communicating the truth in such an ultimate form to his addressees that they are left with no legitimate excuse to deny it. If his efforts are unable to influence them, then it only means that nothing can change and reform them. Consequently, the hopelessness expressed about these people further down in the *sūrah* came absolutely true. None of them embraced Islam and became a prey to his own ego and pride.

Two questions arise here about the nature of this address. One of them is that generally the Qur’ān has not addressed the Quraysh in such a harsh tone; what then is the characteristic of this *sūrah* that they have been addressed by the words يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ. The second question which arises is that the Quraysh and in fact the Arabs in general did not deny God; they associated partners with Him. Why then did the Qur’ān address them as Disbelievers and why did it not address them as Idolaters.

Although we have answered this question at various places in this exegesis and also indicated it in the introduction of this *sūrah*, we allude to the answer here once again.

The answer to the first question is that this address was adopted by the Prophet (sws) only after he had lost hope in them and migrated from them after communicating the truth to them in such an ultimate manner that they were left with no excuse to deny it. The Almighty directs His Messenger to migrate only when it becomes evident from the behaviour of his people that they are not left with any ability to accept faith and their arrogance has

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4. Say: O Disbelievers!

reached such an extent that if they are further pressed they might, God forbid, kill the Messenger. At this instance, it seems absolutely appropriate that a Messenger after declaring his despair and hopelessness from his people and their deities separate from them. Since the preaching of a Messenger has served the purpose of explaining at length both Islam and disbelief, therefore it becomes crystal clear that anyone who adopts either of them does not do so in ignorance. Consequently, at this stage, if he addresses people who have chosen to adhere to disbelief as “O Disbelievers!”, then this address is very apt and pertinent.

A teaching which becomes evident for us from this explanation is that although it is the responsibility of every Muslim to call anything which is polytheistic or comes under the ambit of disbelief as polytheistic and disbelief; however declaring some group as *kāfir* and renouncing it or severing ties from it or declaring *jihād* against it is a matter which requires great caution. In particular, the case of those people who regard their erroneous views to be nothing but Islam is very complex. This is further complicated when no system exists to preach them what true Islam is. In such circumstances, the right path is that a person should criticize their erroneous and deviant views and also distance himself from participating in their activities which are afflicted with polytheistic practices and religious innovations; however, he should not declare them to be *kāfir* and announce his acquittal from them unless he is compelled to do so or unless sound reasons come before him which show that he has communicated the truth to them. This last thing is very difficult.

The answer to the second question is that polytheism (*shirk*) is in fact disbelief (*kufr*). Only that faith is acceptable in religion which comes with complete monotheistic attitudes. This means that a person should not associate anyone with God's being, attributes and rights in any way. The Almighty is in no need of the faith and worship of anyone so that He has to accept every type of faith and every type of worship even though it is contaminated with polytheism. He requires His servants to worship Him on His own prescribed conditions not on those of others. Hence every deed which is not done purely and solely for Him is not acceptable to Him. As per the philosophy of the Qur'ān, there is no difference between a person who denies God and a person who believes in God but also believes in others besides Him either as His equals or as His subordinates. Both these persons are in fact rejecters of God and, in other words, are *kāfir*. The reason for this is that professing belief in God whilst indulging in polytheism is a negation of all His higher attributes and professing faith in such a manner is equivalent to not professing faith in Him. The Qur'ān, whilst addressing these polytheists as disbelievers has revealed that polytheism is in fact disbelief; no one should be

mistaken that it is something lesser than disbelief or that it can be in anyway shown consideration.

لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ<sup>5</sup>

This verse addresses the pundits among the disbelievers of the Qurasyh and answers their proposal of striking a mutual compromise. In other words, their hopes have been shattered to pieces in the very first sentence.

Generally, people have taken لَا أَعْبُدُ in the present tense. Zamakhsharī<sup>6</sup> is of the view that this is against the linguistic principles of Arabic and I agree with him. When the particle لَا is appended to a verb in the continuous tense (مُضارع) in this manner, it necessarily transforms its meaning into the future tense. If a verb in the continuous tense is to be taken in the present tense, then the particle of negation which is appropriate is مَا instead of لَا.

Moreover, negating or affirming something in the present tense has not much use. Everyone among the Quraysh knew that the Prophet (sws) does not worship any of their idols. In such a situation, what use was there to tell them that the Prophet (sws) does not worship what they worship. Their basic objective of presenting the compromise formula was that the Prophet (sws) should show some lenience in his attitude in which there was no possibility of the existence of other deities. If anything could have shattered there hopes, it had to be the emphatic statement that in future too he would not show any lenience in the matter of monotheism.

We have written in the *tafsīr* of the verse<sup>7</sup>: وَدُّوا لَوْ تُدْهِنُ فَيُدْهِنُونَ (٦٨: ٩) (They desire that you be flexible, then they will also be flexible, (68:9)) that after going to the extent of persecution and oppression of the Muslims, the Quraysh had got a fair idea just before migration that they would not be able to stop the ever-increasing force of Islam. The only option left was to pressurize the Prophet (sws) and force him to settle affairs on the principle of “give and take”. This meant that just as they accept a position for the Almighty, the Prophet (sws) should also accept a position for their idols and this compromise would end the dispute. They were hopeful that by pressurizing the Prophet (sws), they would make him accept their stance. They thus exercised all their power to achieve this goal and the situation reached the extent that the Prophet (sws) and His Companions (rta) were forced to migrate. Since

5. I shall worship not that which you worship

6. Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 807.

7. Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān*, vol. 8, 516.

monotheism is the foundation of Islam, going through the trial of migration was tolerated; however, no flexibility was tolerated in the belief of monotheism and it was openly declared: لَا أُعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ (I shall worship not that which you worship).

وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ<sup>8</sup>(٣)

At the same time, the Prophet (sws) also informed his opponents of the bare fact that if they think that they worship or will become the worshippers of the God he worships, then this is a mere thought on their part. The basic condition of serving and worshipping God is that only He be served and worshipped and no one else should have any position in this regard. If they are not willing to give up their deities, they cannot become His worshippers. It is their misconception that they regard themselves to be worshippers of the Almighty. Worshipping other deities besides God cannot be tolerated. If they are to serve Him, then it is essential that they leave serving others. If they combine their worship with His worship, they would definitely be regarded as worshippers of these deities; however, they will have no share in worshipping the Almighty.

The expression مَا تَعْبُدُونَ used in the previous verse is absolutely appropriate for the deities of the Idolaters because they worship imaginary and made-up deities; however, a question does arise about the expression مَا أَعْبُدُ used for the Almighty.<sup>9</sup> The answer to this question is that it is used thus on the principle of *mujānisah*, which is very common in the Arabic language and in the Qur'ān.<sup>10</sup> For example: دَنَّاهُمْ كَمَا دَانُوا (We dealt with them the way they dealt [with us]) and جَزَاءُ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِثْلُهَا (٤٠:٤٢) (The recompense of evil is similar evil. (42:40)).<sup>11</sup> We have already elaborated on this style earlier.<sup>12</sup>

8. Nor will you ever worship that which I worship

9. The question arises because of the particle مَا which in contrast to مَنْ is used for inanimate things. (Translator)

10. *mujānasah* means using similar words or expression such that the second used word or expression does not do the job of conveying its original meaning but rather is of the same genre and category as the previous one. (Translator)

11. In the first of these examples, as clarified by Islāhī elsewhere (see: footnote 8) the words: دَنَّاهُمْ كَمَا actually is in the meaning of: كَمَا فَعَلُوا (the way they did). دَنَّاهُمْ has only come to express *mujānasah* with دَنَّاهُمْ. In the second example, the word evil used second is merely for *mujānasah* as well. Of course, the reward of evil is not a similar evil for the reward is a just act which the perpetrator of evil deserves; this act of justice cannot be called evil in the literal sense. (Translator)

12. Amīn Aḥsan Islāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, vol. 7, 181.

وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ (٤)<sup>13</sup>

The previous declaration related to the future. Here, in this verse, the Prophet (sws) has unequivocally stated that in the past also he never worshipped what the Idolaters worshipped. Zamakhsharī<sup>14</sup> has also interpreted this verse in this manner. I find it to be correct both linguistically and with respect to the context of the verse.

The sentence وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ is a noun sentence and therefore does not have a tense. In other words, it is not in the past or present or future tense and is, in fact, in its absolute form and can be related to any of these tenses in the presence of some indication. Here since مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ is in the past tense hence on the basis of this explicit indication the negation in وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ also relates to the past. The meaning being: “In the past also, I did not worship what you worshipped.”

This sentence increases the intensity of the declaration of acquittal made in the previous verse. The implication would be that when the Prophet (sws) did not even consider worshipping the deities of the Idolaters even before he was blessed with prophethood and with the radiance of divine revelation, how can he now go astray by worshipping them when he is directly receiving guidance from God. In other words, if there had been even a single period in his life in which he subscribed to polytheism, they could expect that he may get convinced to adopt it again. But when even in the age of *jāhilliyah*, he was not contaminated with the filth of polytheism, how can they now expect this from him.

وَلَا أَنتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَّا أَعْبُدُ (٥)<sup>15</sup>

This verse has the same words as verse three and thus seems a repetition; however, it has a different meaning. Like verse four, it relates to the past whereas, as explained earlier, verse three is related to the future. In other words, the leaders of the Quraysh are informed that if they are under the misconception that in the past also they have been worshipping the God whom the Prophet (sws) has been worshipping, then this is an absolutely false notion. As has been explained earlier, worshipping God whilst associating partners with Him, is like not worshipping Him and these leaders have never ever given up worshipping other deities besides God; hence neither does the Prophet (sws) belong to their religious fraternity nor do they belong to his religious fraternity; so how do they expect that they would be able to

13. Nor did I worship that which you worshipped

14. Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 808.

15. Nor did you ever worship that which I have been worshipping



make the Prophet (sws) join their religious fraternity whilst being contaminated with the filth of polytheism.

An obvious question which arises on our interpretation of the verse is that why have the words مَا أَعْبُدُ been used instead of مَا عَبَدْتُ?<sup>16</sup> One answer to this is given by Zamakhsharī<sup>17</sup> that the words مَا عَبَدْتُ have not been said because in that period the Prophet (sws) did not worship God; so he did not give its reference but only referred to his present. However, this answer is absolutely wrong. Prophets of God are sound embodiments of human nature even before they are assigned prophethood and since monotheism is the religion of human nature, they are never incriminated with polytheism which is against human nature. Moreover, they always worship the Almighty in some form or another even though they might have exercised their own opinion in determining this form or deduced it from the previously existing tradition of religion. The Prophet (sws) used to worship God before being given the responsibility of prophethood although we do not have a clear picture of the form in which he worshipped. However, what is known is that it was based on the *hanīfiyyat* whose tradition continued to exist in the Arabian society ever since the times of the prophets Abraham (sws) and Ishmael (sws). Thus, in our opinion, the reason cited by Zamakhsharī for not saying مَا عَبَدْتُ is not correct. The correct reason for this is that the Prophet (sws) did not worship the Almighty merely in the past; the fact of the matter is that just as he worshipped the Almighty in the past, he adhered to worshipping Him in the present also. The words مَا أَعْبُدُ actually express in the past continuous tense the continuity of his worship extending from the past to the present.<sup>18</sup> The implication is that his addressees did not worship in the past the God who was worshipped by him not only in the past but also in the present.

لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ (٦)<sup>19</sup>

The implication of this verse is that when there was no commonality between the religion of the Prophet (sws) in past nor in the present, how do they expect that all of them will agree on one opinion; hence there is no use expecting a compromise; to the Prophet (sws) belongs his religion and to them theirs; he will work according to his way and they should

16. This question arises because of the past tense in مَا عَبَدْتُ. (Translator)

17. Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 809.

18. Iṣlāḥī is referring to the fact that مَا أَعْبُدُ is actually أَعْبُدُ مَا كُنْتُ; there being an ellipsis of the incomplete verb كُنْتُ. (Translator).

19. To you your religion and to me mine!

according to theirs and wait whether the Prophet (sws) is proven correct or they.

A similar declaration is made in the verse: قُلْ يَا قَوْمِ اعْمَلُوا عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِكُمْ إِنِّي عَامِلٌ (۱۳۵:۶) (Tell them: “O People! Do what you are at your place and I will do what I am at my place”, (6:135)). In 11:93 and 39:39,<sup>20</sup> also this declaration is cited with reference to some other Messengers and the objective is to close doors to the discussion and debate initiated by the enemies of the Prophet (sws) to convince him to accept their views. With this declaration he gave them his final verdict that neither is he willing to shift from his religion in the slightest way nor is he willing to accept in anyway their religion.

Generally, people have regarded this verse to be an expression of tolerance. However, this verse actually expresses disgust at the attitude of the disbelievers and in fact is an expression of permanent severing of ties from them and a declaration of war. In short, this is the same declaration which Abraham (sws) made before his followers, which the Qur’ān has mentioned thus:

قَدْ كَانَتْ لَكُمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ فِيٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ إِذْ قَالُوا لِقَوْمِهِمْ إِنَّا بُرَاءُ مِنْكُمْ وَمِمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ كَفَرْنَا بِكُمْ وَبَدَا بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ الْعَدَاوَةُ وَالْبَغْضَاءُ أَبَدًا حَتَّىٰ تُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَحَدَهُ (۴:۶۰)

You have the best example in Abraham and those who followed him. Remember when they said to their people: “We disown you and the idols which you worship besides God. We renounce you and enmity and hate shall reign between us until you believe in the one and only

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20. The words of the verses are:

وَيَا قَوْمِ اعْمَلُوا عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِكُمْ إِنِّي عَامِلٌ سَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ مَنْ يَأْتِيهِ عَذَابٌ يُخْزِيهِ وَمَنْ هُوَ كَاذِبٌ وَارْتَقِبُوا إِنِّي مَعَكُمْ رَقِيبٌ (۹۳:۱۱)

He said: “My people! keep doing what you are doing and I will what I am doing. Soon you shall know upon whom the humiliating scourge comes and [soon you shall know] who is the liar and wait and I will also wait with you.” (11:93)

قُلْ يَا قَوْمِ اعْمَلُوا عَلَىٰ مَكَانَتِكُمْ إِنِّي عَامِلٌ فَسَوْفَ تَعْلَمُونَ مَنْ يَأْتِيهِ عَذَابٌ يُخْزِيهِ (۳۹:۳۹)  
Tell [them]: “Do what you are doing in the way you are and I will do what I am doing in the way I am. You shall soon know who will be seized by a scourge.” (39:39)

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God.” (60:4)

The example of Abraham (sws) and his followers has only been presented before the Prophet (sws) so that he and his followers too make such a declaration of renunciation from their people. Thus it was whilst following this example that the Prophet (sws) made this declaration. So how can tolerance be construed from it. If the context and sequence of a discourse is not kept in consideration, a great inadequacy that results is that people fail to differentiate between words of disgust and words of tolerance. This verse is a very good example of this failure.

With the blessings of God, on these words ends the commentary of this *sūrah*. وأخر دعوانا أن الحمد لله رب العالمين (And our last words are that all praise is for Allah).

Lahore,  
24<sup>th</sup> June, 1980 AD  
10<sup>th</sup> Sha‘bān, 1400 AH

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